
Defense Report

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Mobilizing For War – Could We Do It Fast Enough?

The dictionary says *mobilization* means: *To bring into readiness for immediate active service in war.* U.S. military plans have traditionally been based on the assumption that we can quickly produce the equipment, supplies and trained manpower we would need to the point of conflict. Fortunately, we have never had to put that assumption to a full test because we have never had a war in which there was not enough time to build our combat power gradually.

In late 1978 the Defense Department and a number of civilian agencies of the government which would have a role in a future mobilization conducted an exercise to test our ability to mobilize “. . . for immediate active service in war.” The exercise was given the name “Nifty Nugget.” Its startling findings have been the basis for conjecture and alarm for the past year because they showed that we are not as ready to mobilize as we had assumed. Now the Department of Defense has had a chance to take a hard look at the exercise and to make its final evaluation. The resulting report is no more assuring than the initial impressions.

All the recent arguments supporting a renewal of registration for selective service were substantiated by Nifty Nugget’s look at our ability to find sufficient trained military manpower. The report shows that registration is the very least we can do to solve the problem and that more must be done to bolster the manning of all elements of the Army’s reserves.

The final report reaffirmed our inability to move large numbers of men and necessary amounts of equipment by air or by sea in a realistic time span after an emergency begins. The airlift fleet, even when augmented by civil aircraft, has serious limitations that would become even more critical as the expected shortage of repair parts shrinks the number of transport aircraft that can be kept flying. There is a severe shortfall in the number of high speed cargo ships, especially those configured for “roll-on, roll-off” cargoes, and there are not enough specialized port facilities for loading hazardous cargoes like ammunition.

The biggest surprise, though, comes in the assessment of industrial capacity and our ability to expand that capacity. It is simply not as good as we have always assumed. As weapons and equipment have become more complex and have been bought in smaller numbers, their manufacturers have invested in just enough production machinery to make good on current contracts. The government must obviously contribute more to provide emergency expansion.

The message of Nifty Nugget is clear. We have overstated our ability to mobilize.